

The Secret Capabilities of Your AV System

TEA INTERVIEWS STEVE THORBURN

Audiovisual systems represent major investments; business decisions to configure or upgrade AV capability for a project or venue. But all too often, operators and staff fail to comprehend the full scope of the system at their command. Here, we take a look at the factors that lie behind this real-world problem.

TEA: Steve, your company Thorburn Associates is often called in by clients to help improve an existing facility's audio or AV capabilities. When you first visit a site, what seems to be the most common problem you face as a consultant?

Steve Thorburn: Next to the client saying, "I didn't know you did that," the most frustrating words I typically hear are, "I didn't know the system could do that!" Clients will mention a presentation function they would like added to their existing system. And all too often, their system already has the desired feature. After we have reviewed the system, we then show the client how to properly access that function.

TEA: How does it come about that a client isn't aware of what their own system can do?

ST: Usually it's either because the system was oversold or over-designed to begin with, or the client wasn't properly trained and has never had on-going training. Most often, we find that it is the latter: The current staff has not been trained on how to use the audiovisual system.

TEA: So you've often found staff to be unfamiliar with a system's capabilities.

ST: It isn't unusual to walk into a facility and find out they haven't used their audiovisual system or its major portions for the past year. Their comment is, "We spent all our money on this system and we don't know how to use it." Infrequent use, poor training, staff turnover, all contribute to this sad situation.

Look at theme parks and factories. They go out of their way to train their staff on how to use the tools that are required of them. How do you properly load a guest into a boat ride? How do you fill an injection loaded form? How do you work with the robotics systems that are building the car next to you? But law firms, schools, museums, and corporations generally don't hold the same on-the-job-training for using the audiovisual systems in their facility. This leaves it in our hands to design systems that are easy to use, ergonomically correct, and have a human user interface that is thoughtfully laid out.

TEA: That sounds like a pretty straightforward mandate for consultants and vendors such as yourself. What kind of person with what sort of skills do you generally find running this type of equipment on a day-to-day basis?

ST: When you think about it, these facilities are full of people with a variety of detailed technical



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knowledge. A certain familiarity with modern technology is a common requirement for a corporate job these days. Job listings often call for a candidate to have experience in AutoCAD, Excel, or Microsoft Word. But the job descriptions rarely ask for specific audiovisual presentation skills such as knowledge of Polycom Sound Station, or knowledge of Allen-Bradley ride control surface or AMX Touch Screen control interface panels. Do companies assume that the applicants already have basic training for these? I doubt it. So do they then train the staff to use them, as they would train someone to use a new software program? Usually not. Most software programs have an advantage over presentation systems when it comes to training.

TEA: Why an advantage? With all our computer interfaces these days, aren't all these systems pretty simple to operate, just like your home computer?

ST: Not at all. Most home computer software companies have made it incredibly easy for you to get help. By simply clicking the help file, you can search for specific questions, topics, or keywords. More often than not, you can find the solution to your problem right there loaded into the program. Unfortunately, the AV industry does not yet provide the same type of access and training for the systems we design. At least, not to that extent. Considering the price difference between a desktop publishing program and a videoconferencing system, this should really give us something to think about when considering client needs.

TEA: In building a more client-friendly product, what are some of the ways videoconferencing and presentation system manufacturers could improve their efforts?

ST: How the systems work, why the systems work, and an overview of all the features must be part of an on-going training ritual. In setting up a system, the vendor must identify and develop an on-site champion. That person would communicate with the lead person on the owner's design team to help sell the features of the system to the end users, keeping them up to date on the system's features (and upgrades) well beyond the installation.

TEA: The champion idea is great, but employers today face so much turnover that relying on a single person can prove difficult. What else should be done to help ensure that a system you install will be used to its fullest potential?

ST: One method could be to provide a training video online or perhaps via podcast. It would review the initial training and the

system's features, and be accompanied by a manual that is simple to read. If a company relies heavily on just a few staff members (or possibly just one person) to run their system and know it intimately, they urgently need this kind of backup. What happens when that key person quits or gets relocated? All the knowledge on operating the system goes out the door. Communication with the vendor may fade away at the same time - no one knows who to call.

Simple manuals can save the day for a first-time user. I would be willing to bet that most of us will sit down and actually read a short, concise manual when we work with new devices. I bring this up because we just got a new coffee grinder for our office's daily fix of fresh morning caffeine. The coffee grinder came with a small instruction manual. It was nothing more than a paragraph long and that was probably more than the coffee grinder deserved, but it was short enough that I took the time to read it.

The manuals, touchscreens, and user interfaces that we develop and design into and for systems all need to be short enough to draw the attention of a busy executive and simple enough not to intimidate the new hire.

TEA: You mentioned that communication with the vendor can fade away. Obviously vendors should be aware of this possible scenario and make an effort to stay in touch with clients.

ST: Yes, it's a good idea to take the initiative. Silence from the other end probably means that your contact person is no longer there, and it is time to renew the relationship. We make a practice of providing ongoing support for our clients - some have been with us since we started the company more than 15 years ago. Many come back to us when they lose their copy of the documentation, need to train a new person, or need to re-load code that was inadvertently modified. If you don't provide that extra bit of documentation or the materials are not concise and intuitive, the client might not complain, but they usually don't hire you back for the next job either. It is really important for clients to understand the full capabilities of these systems.

TEA: Why is it so important for clients to understand how to use their videoconferencing and AV presentation systems to full capacity?

ST: In a word, differentiation. It's what the client pays for and it's why we build custom systems, and to sustain it you need trained staff. For our industry to be successful, and for our system designs to be successful in whatever type of venue (be it themed entertainment or corporate presentation facilities) the end users must know how to make them do what they were designed to do - to fulfill the creative purpose and mission of the project. They must be trained, otherwise the work product we have developed is really no better than a jumble of components from a big box store. Clients need to both understand the full power of their systems AND how to make use of that power on a regular basis to reap the full benefit of their investment. The happier they are with their investment in our work, the more successful we become as an industry.



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